



State of Washington

DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

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DETERMINATION OF NONSIGNIFICANCE (DNS)

Name of Proposal: DNS 13-082: WHISKEY DICK WILDLIFE AREA SEASONAL ROAD CLOSURE

Description of Proposal:

The proposal is to restrict the use of motor vehicles within portions of the Whiskey Dick Winter Range during February, March and April of 2014. This area includes about 44,000 acres of state land that is managed as part of the L.T. Murray Wildlife Area for the protection of wildlife and for wildlife related recreation. The boundaries of this proposed management action include: the Old Vantage Highway on the south; the Wild Horse Wind Facility on the west; Quilomene Ridge Road on the north; and the Columbia River on the east. The proposal is to prohibit motor vehicle use, during February through April, on all of the internal “green dot” roads except for a single, motorized, through route that passes from the Ginkgo State Park up to Quilomene Ridge Road. The intent is to provide increased protection and security for wintering big game (primarily elk) and reduce the displacement of elk to private properties to the west, while still continuing to provide the maximum recreational opportunities that are consistent with wildlife protection. The winter closure will be implemented with a combination of signage and maps at the major points-of-entry, public information, monitoring and enforcement.

WDFW’s mandate is to preserve, protect and perpetuate fish, wildlife and their habitats, and to maximize sustainable wildlife-related recreation. The Colockum, Quilomene and Whiskey Dick Wildlife Areas were purchased specifically to provide big game winter range and upland game bird habitat, and also to provide diverse wildlife-related recreational opportunities such as hunting, fishing and wildlife viewing.

The management goals for the L.T. Murray/Quilomene/Whiskey Dick Wildlife Areas are to preserve habitat and species diversity for both fish and wildlife resources, maintain healthy populations of game and non-game species, protect and restore native plant communities, and provide diverse opportunities for the public to encounter, utilize, and appreciate wildlife and wild areas.

Between 2000 and 2006 the following trends were observed in the area: decreased elk use in the southern end of the winter range by mid-winter, high levels of winter/spring traffic on roads in the south end of the winter range, and high incidents of elk damage on private lands. The Whiskey Dick winter motorized vehicle restriction was first implemented in 2008 to achieve several objectives, including: address chronic private agricultural damage; reduce disturbance to wintering wildlife (primarily elk); and do so with minimal impact to public winter recreation.

Much of the Whiskey Dick Wildlife Area is low elevation shrub-steppe. Therefore, it is snow-free most of the year, and easily accessible by motorized vehicles when wildlife are present in large numbers. Advances in motorized recreational equipment have improved the ability to access areas that were historically closed in winter due to weather or road conditions (snow, mud, steep slopes etc.). In addition, the rising popularity of shed antler hunting has increased

early spring recreational pressure.

Elk are ‘refuge seekers’ and avoid open roads when possible. This does not mean they will not be seen near roads, but that they are less likely to utilize forage and habitats adjacent to open roads. Many factors can influence their movements, both temporally and spatially, and vary year to year, so they may move off the winter range, return, and then move off again during the same year, depending on weather and plant growth. Colockum elk traditionally come out of winter with minimal body fat levels, so providing an area with reduced winter disturbance can help slow the loss of energy throughout winter.

The effects of roads on elk movements have been studied for decades, and in 2013, Scott McCorquodale, WDFW’s Deer and Elk Specialist, summarized the results of numerous studies from the 1970s to present, in “A Brief Review of the Scientific Literature on Elk, Roads, & Traffic”. This document can be found online at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/publications/01491/>. To mitigate the effects of disturbance on wintering wildlife, winter range closures are applied in parts of Washington and most other western states. The proposed three-month Whiskey Dick vehicle restriction is shorter than those applied in other states, and only restricts motorized access, allowing non-motorized recreation to continue year-round. Of the entire winter range for the Colockum Elk Herd, only a small area on West Bar and this proposed southern portion on Whiskey Dick are subject to the motorized vehicle restriction. A similar, though larger, vehicle restriction was applied annually to the Whiskey Dick Winter Range from 2008 to 2013. Prior to the initial seasonal, winter range restriction to motor vehicles, the Colockum herd was below objective for bull to cow ratios, total herd size, and calf to cow ratios, and antlerless elk hunting opportunities had been significantly reduced. With implementation of the seasonal motorized vehicle restriction, hunting restrictions and other management actions, private land damage complaints have decreased, total herd size has increased, the herd size in the southern portion of the winter range has increased, and antlerless harvest opportunities have been partially restored. Not all of these positive trends can be attributed to the restriction of motor vehicles, but it has been one of several related management actions.

Proponent/Applicant: Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife
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Location of Proposal, including street, if any: WDFW Whiskey Dick Wildlife Area,
Washington, Kittitas County:

T17N, R22E, Sections 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 14, 15, and 17

T17N, R21E, Sections 1, 2, 3, 11, 13, and 14

T18N, R22E, Sections 3-11, 14-21, 23-35

T18N, R21E, Sections 1, 11-15, 23, 25, 26, and 35

T19N, R22E, Sections 26, 32-35

Lead Agency: Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW)

WDFW has determined that this proposal will likely not have a significant adverse impact on the environment. Therefore, state law¹ does not require an environmental impact statement (EIS). WDFW made this determination of nonsignificance (DNS) after we reviewed the environmental checklist and other information on file with us.

We issued this DNS according to state rules.² We will **not act on this proposal for 14 days** from the date we issued the DNS. Agencies, affected tribes, and members of the public are invited to comment on this proposal or DNS. We must receive your comments within 14 days of the date of this letter. This means we must receive your comments by **January 13, 2014**.

Method of Comment:

The following procedures shall govern the method to comment on agency SEPA proposals. Comments received through these procedures are part of the official SEPA record for this proposal.

You can submit your comments any one of the following ways:

- Email to SEPAdesk2@dfw.wa.gov
- Online at the WDFW SEPA website comment link at: <http://wdfw.wa.gov/licensing/sepa/>
- Fax to (360) 902-2946;
- Mail to the address below.

Responsible Official: Bob Zeigler

Position/Title: SEPA/NEPA Coordinator, WDFW Regulatory Services Section

Address: 600 Capitol Way North, Olympia, WA 98501-1091

After the comment period closes, applicants may view the updated status of this proposal on the WDFW SEPA website: <http://wdfw.wa.gov/licensing/sepa/> Once the status is posted as final, applicants and permittees may take action on the proposal. When a proposal is modified or withdrawn, notice will be given in accordance with state law.¹

If you have questions about this DNS or the details of the proposal, contact Bob Zeigler at the address, e-mail, or fax number above; you can also call him at (360) 902-2578.

DATE OF ISSUE: December 23, 2013

SIGNATURE:



Footnotes

1. RCW 43.21C.030(2)(c)
2. WAC 197-11-340(2).

SEPA Log Number: 13 -082. dns